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There are a few exceptional people among us who have impressed us with their abilities to create and be successful in more than one area. Melvin Van Peebles, an enormously talented and fiercely independent black film maker, director, writer, producer, actor, composer, author and God-only-knows-what-else, is one of those people.

Out of the intense desire to communicate his ideas to as many people (and especially black people) as possible, Van Peebles has put forth his beliefs through several different creative channels, those channels being film, theatre, albums and books. He has carefully chosen media that people are exposed to all the time; and, by reenacting his own personal experiences through these channels, he has gained an audience that relates fervently and enthusiastically to his work.

There are some who may say that he has put himself in a vulnerable and weak position, but there is tremendous strength in that vulnerability. He is a driving force, a walking dynamo of energy, and he chooses what he wishes people to see.

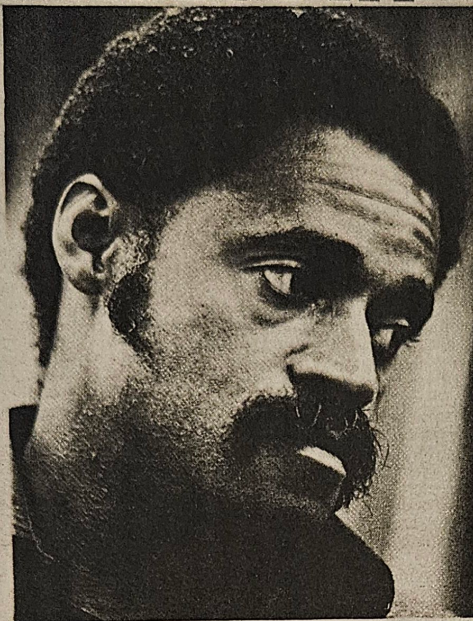
Consequently, if he chooses to let people see his vulnerable side, if he leaves himself open for criticism or even failure, there is a reason for it.

Melvin Van Peebles is smart, although he would never openly admit it. He gets things done, even if he has to do them himself (which is often the case). He has never been known to be malicious or vindictive — he merely fights unceasingly for what he believes in.

His film credits include *La Permission*, an early film done in Paris, which was the French entry to the San Francisco Film Festival; *Watermelon Man*, an extremely funny paradox showing Godfrey Cambridge as a bigoted white man who wakes up one morning to find that his skin has turned black; and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadass Song*, a film laden with controversy, dealing with a black experience (or, rather, one man's experiences in discovering "political awareness" — that man being black) through a stark, urban film making style.

Not only was *Sweetback* the highest-grossing independent film ever made, but it was the catalyst for the upsurge in the so-called market of "black" films being made and distributed so successfully today. Van Peebles' theatre credits include two Broadway musicals, *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death* and *Don't Play Us Cheap*, both of which earned him nine Tony Award nominations. He is the author of eight books, written in French and English, including *Sweetback*, and a new book entitled *The True American*.

MELVIN



VAN PEEBLES

Under contract with A&M Records for many years, he produced five albums of highly introspective song-poems for the label. There are many on that serene studio lot who will never forget Melvin Van Peebles. When Melvin came on the lot, there was bound to be some excitement: secretaries would hide under their desks and executives would lock their office doors. Once a few years ago, Melvin showed up at an A&M publicity photo session wearing his hair in braids and a T-shirt that read, "Rated X by an all-white jury."

Now on Atlantic Records, he has produced his sixth album, entitled *What the #!% You Mean I Can't Sing?* In an earnest effort to enter the world of R&B, pop, rock 'n' roll and all that, Melvin does sing on this album and, with help from his immensely talented musical director Harold Wheeler, manages to pull it off very well.

The songs, especially "Eyes on the Rabbit," are excellent and validly qualify him for the same league as other pop idols now seen on late-night television shows.

At any rate, Melvin Van Peebles is after the siege of the pop world, and knowing Melvin, he will capture the territory in no time at all.

I'm most compelled to just have you talk. There's so much that you have to say. Is there anything specific that you'd like to discuss?

Let's discuss the album. Discussing the album encompasses everything. Someone once asked me how long it took me to do this album, and I said, "Forty-one years." If you had asked me how long it took me to do *Sweetback*, it would have been my age at that time. So, in discussing the new album, my age really encompasses the whole work. You see, I feel that

it is apparent that I really am about what I say I am about, and not just simply a rip-off of a disenfranchised community.

What is it that you have said about yourself?

It's not simply what I've said or what I've implied. It's just the whole stance. A lot of these people that have a semi-political stance are not really that sincere about it. It's simply an opportunistic move, which wasn't the case in my case. You see, what I was able to do in *Sweetback* was offer some people 2 for 1. They had the chance of helping me and the opportunity also of seeing me fail.

And also to help themselves, if it worked out.

No, not particularly. I'm talking about much larger media and economic forces that allowed me to slip through. I saw a hole, and I was able to slip through this loophole. It was a hole, really, built by racism, and everyone assumed, of course, that I was going to fall on my ass. But I had no intention of falling on my ass.

Have you ever?

Have I ever fallen on my ass? Oh, all the time. You see, probably the greatest asset I have is that I have a very mundane opinion of myself.

Really?

Yeah.

I don't believe that.

It's true.

It doesn't appear that way.

Okay, tell me how it appears, then.

You've always seemed to me to be very self-assured and a man of your own mind.

Oh, those things are true. I am self-assured and a man of my own mind, but that's because failure doesn't frighten me. Do you follow what I'm saying? And, since failure, as a mundane entity, doesn't frighten me, then you can do a lot of things. I've been at dances with guys, and we'd see a girl and everybody would be saying, "Gee, I wonder if she'll dance with me if I ask her," and so forth and so on. They'll sit at the table and talk for hours about "Will she?" What really stops

them from going over there is the fear of rejection.

But nothing much ever stops you, does it?

Well, rejection just doesn't hold that specter for me. I'd go ask her.

Then why do you say that you think of yourself as being mundane?

No, I didn't mean mundane, per se. I meant a mundane opinion of myself. Now, let me explain what I mean. Let's take when I was doing *Watermelon Man* for Columbia. There was a typical decision that had to be made one day, and the guys were all hemming and hawing away. I said, "Let's do such-and-such." They said, "Oh, but you don't know." I said, "Yeah, but I want to do it," and they said, "Okay, but YOU'RE RESPONSIBLE." Now, that's the ultimate fear someone can lay on you — "YOU'RE RESPONSIBLE." When I said "Okay," everybody almost fell over. They said, "You mean you'll be responsible for that action?"

Now, if you think that your shit doesn't stink, and if you move and you make a mistake, then you're faced with that reality. I make mistakes — I make them all the time. So, what's the big deal? So, not having that fear of failure, I can go ahead.

But, that still makes your opinion of yourself very high.

No, I think it's just a realistic view of just the forces around you.

You mean trial and error — some things will work and some things won't. You find the equalizer. We all shit, we all pee.

That's right. Everybody puts on his pants one leg at a time. So, what's the big deal? So, why can't I make a mistake? And so I'll go over to the table and ask the lady if she wants to dance. And if she says "No," then there's supposedly that terrible moment that you have to come back across the dance floor with your friends snickering. Eh, big deal. (Laughter)

That wouldn't hurt you? Have you ever been hurt?

No, what's the big deal? You see, I'm very fortunate. I'm not

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that bright. (More Laughter)
I don't believe that.

I'm serious. I don't put things in that category.

But, what has being bright got to do with hurt feelings and emotions?

Well, let's just use the word "sensitive."

That's a better word. You're not that sensitive. Yes, I'll agree with that. Sensitivity and intelligence are two completely different things.

Right, they are. And people are usually very sensitive about themselves, and they can be very callous about everybody else. I used to work on the cable cars, and sometimes a guy would say, "Hey, Boy, where is such-and-such a street?" And I would stop the fellow, and I'd say, "Which 'Boy' did you mean? Did you mean 'Fellow,' 'Mac,' 'Guy,' or did you mean 'Sambo Nigger'?"

I didn't have to hit him first — I'd ask him. In fact, I'd even give him a chance of changing his mind, because I'm not sensitive about it. I'd ask him. Now, if you're wrong, I'll knock your head off if I can. If I can't knock your head off, I'll smile until you turn your back — then I'll knock your head off. You know, that's where that's at.

So anyway, what happened with Sweetback, up until that time, no black film had ever made any money. This was thrown up to me, and I said to them, "Well, how do you guys know? You've never made a black film. You keep making these films of white fantasies that blacks were acting out." Everybody sort of growled at me about that. But anyway, when only two theatres in the United States would take me...

Which theatres were they?

Oh, one was a little bingo house in Detroit. One was a theatre in Atlanta, Ga. Atlanta, Ga., right? The only two places that would play it uncut.

Nothing in New York?

Now. New York, Philly, Chicago, nowhere. L.A., nothing. Okay, so anyway, when all of this happened, I was able to get through because there were just no forces put up

against me. Because it was just so far out. However, even with the success of Sweetback, today I still can't go to a bank and get a loan. Even with the success of Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death and Don't Play Us Cheap.

Why is that?

Well, because, once again, I'm sort of working outside the system. I've been successful and I've paid everybody back, so what's the big deal? But, that's only part of the problem. The other part of the problem is what brings me to the album. You see, I really wasn't wondering. The thing is, I have not had the opportunity for media exposure commensurate with my status. The talk shows have been closed to me. People can say, "Oh, that's a bunch of shit," or whatever you would like to say about them, but you do need those viewers.

I've seen you on a couple of talk shows. I think I saw you on Dick Cavett once.

I was on Cavett once, two years ago. It was pushed, through by a very large organization. But that was one time. I was on the Frost Show for three minutes.

What do you mean by a large organization? You mean a booking agency?

No. You know, Time, Life, Look — none of those magazines would even review Sweetback. Not to say that it was even bad. They just wouldn't review it. Everybody just thought that it was going to die, it didn't exist, and everybody was giving it the kiss of death.

However, when it did so fantastic, they had to play "catch up," and at that stage of the game I had a page in Time — not as a film review, but as sort of a freak phenomenon. Newsweek was the only one who reviewed the film.

So anyway, what happened was, a lot of news was built, a lot of what was a la mode was built, and the week I was to appear in Time and Life, it was their forces that commanded my appearance on the Dick Cavett Show. That's how I got on the Cavett Show.

That's interesting.

Yeah, it is. You see, all these things tie in. Now what happened, even with Time-Life, I was pictured as a black capitalist. This is the only way they could relate to a black guy doing that kind of thing, so I'd have to be a black capitalist. You understand?

Right.

But, when that wasn't even where I was at, at that time, the clothes were on pretty tight. Now, a film is a mass-market product, and you can only buy so much advertising. The rest is publicity and promotion that the media just automatically picks up because it's news. In the norm, if you take The Three Musketeers, everywhere you look up you'll have somebody on the Carson Show, or this show or that show, and you would become aware of its existence.

But, you did that for a while with Sweetback, didn't you?

I did that with Sweetback, but I can only move so fast and so rapidly like that. Then the loans and the credit and things like that, which I was able to acquire with Sweetback and which I was able to pay back, are not forthcoming any more because I can't promise 2 for 1. I'm out to succeed. I'm out to become petitioned. I figured it was kind of a closed door.

So then, at that stage of the game, I mulled over this for a long time. I wrote some books, and thought, and I tried to work within the ethos of the mores of the society to find out how I could penetrate the market.

Now, I had a little plan for penetrating the market which is, for example, one of my failures. I had hoped that the songs from my soundtracks, from my films, from my other albums, would be

Since I couldn't get anyone to pick up my songs, I did them myself, and as you know, the album is already on the charts, and it's just going up through the roof. Of course, now it will be funny because I'll be attacked for being on an ego trip — "Why does he have to do everything?" kind of thing. I don't! Hey man, I'm asking for help, and I didn't get any help, so I'm doing it myself.

The album is really a by-product of my whole guerilla philosophy of getting things out there. This philosophy entails more than just one thing. You see, I think one of the big problems of the parallel cultures is that we don't have a way of raising the consciousness, or we haven't utilized the ways that we have of raising the consciousness.

There are three powerful things where people are, and



Well, then how did Sweetback become successful, if there wasn't very much media promotion on it?

Sweetback became successful through the black market. It made \$5 million, I suppose, before three white people ever saw it.

Was there heavy promotion done in the black areas?

That's right. But the promotion that was done in those areas was a one-to-one kind of local promotion. But, it's impossible for me, as one man, to do local promotion every time, because everything then becomes a five-year project. You know, if you have to come up with the formula, design the bottles and then go sell it jar by jar yourself, you can be cut off at the pass.

picked up and played by other artists. And this was never forthcoming. None of my songs have ever been done by anyone, which would have given me a key to opening up the mass market.

Well, since that key was not forthcoming, and being a deeply religious person, reading the Bible and everything, He says, "He helps those who help themselves." So I said, "Okay, I'm going to help myself." So, with the new album, rather than doing it in the usual sort of fashion, waiting to be picked up by other singers, and done in the normal format that would be accessible for the jocks to play constantly, I did it myself.

And, once again, it's like Sweetback — when I couldn't get anyone to play the role (of Sweetback), I played it myself.

that is: 1) they watch movies, 2) they watch television, and 3) they listen to records. In television, because the umbilical cord is so tight between you and the sponsor, it's really not feasible to attack, per se, as your series or something. So, that does, however, leave films, and that does, however, leave music.

What about books?

Books are nice, and so forth, and I write 'em and I love to write 'em...

Do you read them?

Yeah, I read 'em. But it's not that mass that reads books.

What about the black films that have been coming out recently, such as the Pam Grier films. How do you feel about those

(please turn to page 32)

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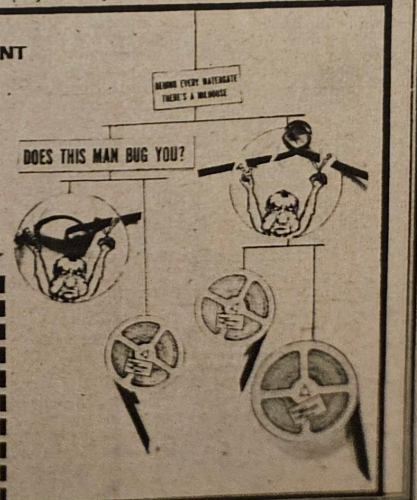
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his multipartite walls, his two huge block *Geometric Forms*, the familiar *Geometric Form-Red X* from the collection of the County Museum and the *Dark Monolith with Opening*, each is so final a statement that it is clear why the artist needed a

mourner at the Pasadena's grave. No other artist exhibited by the museum in the last years could have filled the role with such decorum or have paid the memory of the institution so gentle and plaintive tribute — the work in the wing leading to

Farewell Pasadena.

(Clark Polak's Contemporary Art Forum can be heard on KPFF some Fridays at 3:30 p.m. This month's shows are scheduled for May 24 and May 31.) □

VAN PEEBLES

(continued from page 19)

shown, and black people eat it up. A lot of people just don't understand. Hey man, there's a whole 'nother thing out there!

Did you write it?

Yeah.

You wrote it, produced it, directed it?

Yeah.

What about a release?

Well, you see, the other day I was on *Soul Train*, and the guy said, "What are you going to do next," and I told him I was going to release *Harlem Melodies*. That was more exposure that I'd gotten on the film than I could hope to buy. Just that. And all those things are closed to me. That's why I've come around to circumventing a new way so that I can get my promotion and publicity out there to the public, who still have to depend on their information to come from the talk shows and through the D.J.'s. I had to make it feasible films, in comparison to the films that you've been making?

I think everything I've done is better.

Well, I agree that they're better, but...

That's all that I would say. I like mine. You know, you have to remember, I was probably the first one in. I had a long time woodshedding, and black films, or the films with black people in them, because they're usually written by white people — produced, directed and owned by white people — they're not really black films.

They're often just carbon copies of white films, only with black people.

You noticed that, heh? (Laughter)

As opposed to your films...

should be able to relate to *Sweetback*. I know a professor at Columbia who was talking about *Sweetback* as a black film, and a kid who was an ex-GI stood up and said, "Hey man, that film was me."

Yes, I can see that.

We can't allow ourselves to be shunted off. The question of him as an exploited tool beginning to have a political awakening is not unique to blacks. But what is very interesting, what people are just beginning to understand, is my use of music, my editing, the way I shoot, is from a very urban, black background, and so forth. But, why not? When I shot a French film, I shot it in the old, normal, French perspective.

You see, there's a great deal of artistic arrogance in the Anglo-Saxon, and in general arrogance. He assumes that his universality is the universality. It's only a universality. That's why *Sweetback* responds to a cord in a whole society. The new movie, *Harlem Melodies*, I've

so that they were in a position to aid me. Which is what I've done. Pretty clever, huh? (Laughter)

It's not mundane.

Oh, all right, you're supposed to be very supportive of me so people out there will get the right idea. Now, I'm going to ask

you once more, "Pretty clever, huh?"

Very clever.

Thank you.

I think you're a very clever man. I also think you're a very good man.

Well, you know, I could learn my schemes in the post office. (Laughter)

Do you think a lot?

Well, that depends on who you ask.

I mean, just in general.

Some people say I don't. I think I do.

Do you think alone, or do you like to play off of other people and come up with ideas with a group of people?

I've been to those parties. (Laughter)

You know what I'm talking about.

Sure I do. Where's it going to be? (More laughter)

What are your plans now?

Well, I'm going to do *Sweetback 2*, as soon as I can arrange the financing, and then more of the same.

More albums?

More albums, more books, more plays, more parties. (More laughter)

Is there anything else that you want to say?

Not on the tape. □

BOOKS

(continued from page 25)

faithful Indian scouts who helped the American cavalry to track Apaches and Cheyennes to their hiding places."

As history, the book is neither analytical nor comprehensive. The most interesting sections deal with peripheral material — the Italian Mafia and its stranglehold on the Italian political system of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But a similar treatment of the Mafia in

ghetto of today: the lack of "native" police, the propensity of ghetto criminals to prey on their own people, the reluctance of ghetto victims to inform on their compatriots, the waves of indiscriminate white backlash triggered by Italian/black criminals and the attempts by honest ghetto residents to set up vigilance committees within the ghetto.

Although there is some attempt at a suspenseful style, the writing is basically straightforward; Petacco is a journalist, and the book reads much like a lively, intelligent newspaper article. This means,